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UNCLAS MUSCAT 000539

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARPI, EB/TRA/AN (LJONES), AND EB/CBA  
(BBEHRENS)  
DEPARTMENT PASS DOT FOR OST (SHATLEY)

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS:

SUBJECT: GULF AIR PLANS NON-STOP TO PARIS, RENEWAL OF AGING  
FLEET

REF: A. MUSCAT 385  
B. 05 MUSCAT 1436

¶1. (SBU) On April 4, the Gulf Air Area Manager for Muscat, Bennet Stephens (protect) told the DCM that on April 6, Gulf Air charter planes would be bringing 250 French tour agents to Oman for a 4 day/5 night familiarization/marketing tour of the Sultanate, paid for and sponsored by the Omani Ministry of Tourism. Stephens added that on July 1, Gulf Air would begin direct flights to Paris.

¶2. (SBU) According to Stephens, Abu Dhabi's final decision to pull out of the regional partnership (leaving Bahrain and Oman as Gulf Air's sole owners) happened more quickly than expected, despite persistent rumor long before the fact. "We have our 9/11, too," he said, explaining that from the announcement of Abu Dhabi's pull out on September 11, 2005 until December 11, just three months later, Gulf Air had to increase its traffic in and out of Muscat's Seeb International Airport from 90 flights a week to 220 (Note: Stephens' figures are slightly higher than those reported in a recent Gulf Air press release. End note.)

¶3. (SBU) Stephens said that he did not expect Oman to pull out of Gulf Air, despite rumors to the contrary. "The Sultan has a very personal attachment to Gulf Air," he opined, noting that HM remembered the airline when it started during his father's reign and there were virtually no other carriers in the southern Gulf.

¶4. (SBU) Stephens added that the carrier had reached an agreement with Oman Air to focus on long haul routes, while Oman's national carrier would service only routes five hours or less out of Muscat. He said a "major announcement" would be made on May 18th concerning refurbishing Gulf Air's aging fleet, but offered no details.

GRAPPO